

# Five reasons why grammar is important



Join **Shahan Choudhury** and **Dick Hudson** as they lead us through the intricacies of English grammar and give us five very good reasons why teaching grammar is important.

You may belong to the *'for'* or *'against'* camp of grammar, or even be indifferent; but whatever stance you take, you've probably got ideas on why grammar might be worth teaching. What's the point of grammar teaching? Is it just to pass the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test? Or to avoid someone's favourite list of grammatical mistakes? If you can't get past those ideas you probably think it's a waste of time.

But we think there are good reasons for teaching grammar and we'd like to share them with you. Learning to recognise and talk about verbs, tenses and the like is an important part of education, and pays off in a number of different ways.

What we mean by *grammar* is the same as the English National Curriculum means: the ways in which our language allows us to take words and tweak them or fit them together to make complex meanings. We think

children should know about this wonderful facility that they have inherited, and should be able to talk about it.

Take tense, for example. This allows us to take any verb—say, WALK—and tweak its shape to show how the event concerned relates to the present: *walk* or *walks* for what we call the 'present' tense and *walked* for the 'past'. These terms are fine for some uses—I *walk* to school *nowadays* versus I *walked* to school *last year*. Here the contrast is just a matter of time: now versus before now.

But there's much more to tense than that, and it's mostly to do with the imagination. Past tense locates us in an imaginary world of possibilities.

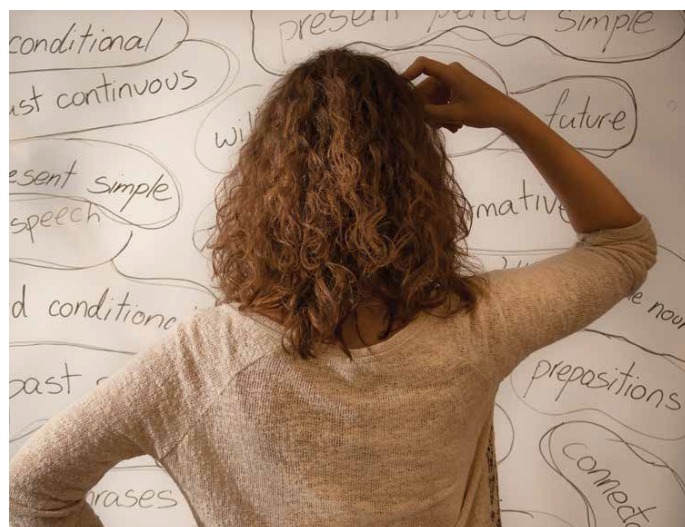
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Take the past tense *left* in *It's time we left*. The leaving is still imaginary, and is definitely not located before now; and notice that the present tense isn't allowed here: *\*It's time we leave*. (\* means 'ungrammatical'.) The same imaginary use is found with *if*, as in *If you helped we would finish earlier*. You're definitely not helping at the moment, nor do you look like helping (in contrast with *If you help, we will finish earlier*.) We think children deserve to know about this very useful tool for exercising their imaginations.

**Here, then, are our five reasons for teaching grammar.**

### 1. Thinking

Whether we realise it or not, we're in an ongoing state of thinking when using language—there's just so much to think about. Most of the thinking is unconscious, below the surface, but it's there and it rises to the surface when the going gets tough: How should I put this thought into words? What on earth does this complicated sentence mean? What we're teaching when we teach about grammar is the skill of thinking about grammatical choices, of applying general grammatical principles to the very particular challenge of the moment.



In life, we typically think before acting—for example, we see danger and then avoid it; likewise, the mind precedes speech—we think before we talk. In preparation for a writing project we might say '*put your thinking caps on*'. Pupils need to think about content and mood, but also about the language they are going to use—and not only the words, but also how they're going to assemble the words into grammatically successful sentences. That takes conscious thinking about grammar in some shape or form.

Of course, this thinking is all the more challenging because it will be tightly driven by the context. The sentence has to be suited not only to the intended meaning but also to the people we're talking or writing

to and to our purposes. '*Thinking aloud*' through these aspects can help create clarity, not only in our own minds, but in our children's too.

Thinking about grammar is an important mental skill which serves as an aid to communication, and also as a mental exercise. Working out how the words in a sentence fit together is like a session in a mental gym, comparable in complexity and challenge to anything in mathematics. And if learning grammar is healthy for the mind and helps keep us mentally active, then why not?



### 2. Understanding

Thinking about grammar and discussing it requires a degree of understanding. By '*understanding*', we mean the ability to explain, e.g. to explain the difference between '*I kicked the ball*' and '*I have kicked the ball*'. This understanding leads us on to other questions surrounding language structure and use. For example, how does *have kicked* relate to *had kicked*? And when would it be appropriate to use each structure?

Learning these links can help overcome misconceptions that learners might have. For example, it is important to understand the complex combination of present and past in *have kicked*, which describes a present state resulting from a past action; and to know about the imaginary uses of the past tense discussed earlier. Having the ability to discuss and explain grammatical concepts is a key ingredient to successful teaching and learning.

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The National Curriculum encourages ‘*noticing*’ in science, and the same general principles apply to grammar. Children need to learn to notice the grammar that they meet in reading, writing and speaking or listening in order to understand it better.

### 3. Reading

What role does grammar have in your English/Guided Reading sessions at present? Once grammar is understood, it can have huge potential to enhance reading comprehension skills. Whatever form of reading we engage in, whether it is fiction, non fiction or poetry, grammar can be used as a tool for comprehension.

Whilst reading a text, we can ask pupils to carry out various ‘noticing’ and discursive activities. For example, take the verb forms *rolled* and *were climbing* in ‘The bear *rolled* over on the winter grass’; ‘Three little penguins *were climbing* over the igloo’ Pupils could explore the differences in meaning between the two verb forms by collecting further examples of each pattern (which encourages noticing) and thinking about their shared meanings—an excellent exercise in analysis. All being well, they will decide that the past simple (*rolled*) views the event from the outside while the past progressive (*were climbing*) views it from the inside.



Another idea would be for pupils to study verb tenses—past or present—used in their reading, noticing the choices and working out why these choices had been taken.

In a narrative, one of the challenges is tense consistency—the ability to maintain tense choices consistently through a series of verbs. This is challenging precisely because we can choose the ‘now’ of tense: the moment of writing (*Long ago there was ...*) or the moment of the ongoing event (*When I reach the village, I walk up to a door ...*). The writer has to remember this choice, and stick to it—not easy when planning an adventure.

Other genres offer different challenges; for instance, the tense in an advertisement is generally present, tied to the moment of reading. There's plenty to learn, and to teach, about the use of tenses—but how much easier that is for those who know about tense, who can notice tense choices, and who can talk about them.

### 4. Writing

This skill is closely related to reading. After all, good writers are believed to be good readers as well. The English National Curriculum suggests that ‘Teachers should make sure that pupils build on what they have learnt, particularly in terms of the range of their writing and the more varied grammar, vocabulary and narrative structures from which they can draw to express their ideas.’ In short, schools should help children to expand their language, including the grammatical structures available when writing. What does this mean to you? How would you want your children to use more grammar in writing?



Would starting with a subject i.e. a noun phrase be standard practice (*‘The school is on a hill.’*)? Maybe so in KS1, but as children grow and develop, more sophisticated structures could be modelled (*‘Sitting on a hill, which is one of the highest in the village, the grandiose Police building overlooks the entire village...’*). This is an example of a multi-clause sentence that uses a subordinate relative clause to provide additional detail on the setting and atmosphere. Another example could be: *‘Tiptoeing through the dark, dingy hallway, Ahmed’s breath came to a lull the second he glanced up at the ceiling.’*

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Illustrating a range of grammatical conventions to initiate and develop sentences helps create variety and keeps readers interested. There is a caveat though: at times you may just want them to keep their sentences short and simple. Try and strike a balance.



## 5. Listening and speaking

As a practitioner, what do you do about regional dialect forms in your children's speech? Policeman or scientist? Do you arrest grammatical 'mistakes' or do you study them with the children?

Whilst the English National Curriculum supports Standard English (SE) as a dialect in formal settings, it also supports the study of non-Standard dialects. (In Years 3 and 4, it says 'pupils should start to learn about some of the differences between Standard English and non-Standard English and begin to apply what they have learnt [for example, in writing dialogue for characters].')

We strongly recommend taking the regional dialect seriously, as something for the class to investigate. After all, it must be better for them to feel proud of how they speak, mustn't it? And this is an area where they're already world experts. Moreover, they'll learn the Standard forms faster and better if they understand how they're different from what they know already.

Teachers and children come from various geographical locations and backgrounds, and so these should be acknowledged and built on, making a linguistically rich learning environment possible. Rather than following a '*mistakes-oriented*' approach, we believe we ought to embrace other dialects found around the UK and teach children about them.

For example, many from the Merseyside region have their own grammar, e.g. the plural pronoun '*yous*': '*What made **yous** go down that alley?*' How much better than the Standard '*you*' which could be either singular or plural!

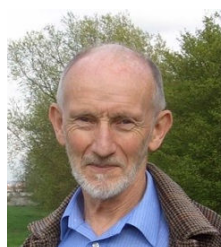
Highlighting differences between the grammars can help create a positive learning experience for children. And of course, it could even help bring different communities together. Feel free to watch the clips on Scouse here:

<https://word-connection.com/english-dialects-scouse/>.

We hope that in this article we've managed to get you thinking about the importance of grammar by setting out some plausible reasons—from helping us to become mentally active, to having an understanding of our own language, both of which can help us become expert in reading, writing, listening and speaking. We'll leave you with this: we believe grammar is an integral and essential tool of the English curriculum, and once it's understood well, it can be used to achieve a plethora of language-related benefits—the world is your oyster.



**Shahan Choudhury** has experience as a primary teacher and is currently doing a PhD at the University of Exeter with Professor Debra Myhill on children's and teachers' understanding of grammar. He also teaches Academic Writing for postgraduates at Exeter and undergraduates at Anglia Ruskin University London. As a teacher, he was fascinated by the role of research in developing 'good practice' in education.  
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**Richard (Dick) Hudson** is a retired Professor of Linguistics at UCL. Most of his research focused on the grammar of English, but throughout his career he was committed to building bridges between linguistics and schools, inspired by his early boss Michael Halliday.  
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Do feel free to contact us if you have any comments/suggestions, however contentious they may be!

### Further reading:

If you're interested in accessing materials for teaching English, try this:

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/writing/grammar-teacher-resources/grammaraschoice/>

Developed by Prof Debra Myhill and her team at the University of Exeter, it contains a wealth of resources on grammar and writing, including lesson plans and schemes of work from KS1 to KS4.

<http://www.englishic.org>

Professor Bas Aarts, UCL, developed these resources for explicit teaching of grammar from KS1 to KS5.